

Rufinus and Jerome's Ascetic Communities: Origenism in the Early Church

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Recent scholarship has illumined the influential social factors pertaining to the Origenist controversy in 397 C.E. besides theology. A comprehensive examination needs to be made of the ascetic practices carried out in the two Palestinian monastic communities of Rufinus and Jerome. Regarding this topic, Elizabeth Clark states, "The ascetic debate, I propose, was not displaced by the Origenist controversy: it was subsumed within it."¹ This quote highlights the predominance of an ascetic debate throughout the Origenist Controversy, and maintains asceticism's importance in the dialogue concerning Origen's "heretical" ideas. The ascetic regimens Rufinus and Jerome advocated to females within and outside their monastic communities included similar forms of abstinence, yet the differing motivations and goals of these practices reveal early theological engagement with Origen. The brand of monasticism found at the Mount of Olives community, which Rufinus guided spiritually, should be viewed as far more mystical and speculative, following Origen's rejection of anthropomorphism. It focused on the "pure prayer" advocated by Evagrius Ponticus which had its roots in the Egyptian desert at Nitria, an Origenist hotspot. Jerome's community in Bethlehem lived a highly structured life both academically and physically. The women he instructed were attracted to Palestine as a land filled with scriptural images; this contrasts strongly with the goal of stripping all material imagery from prayer.

In the early Christian community, orthodoxy, or right belief, is fundamentally tied to orthopraxis, correct practice. This makes the Origenist Controversy just one piece of a much larger dialogue occurring in the early Christian Church which involved issues of

¹ Elizabeth A. Clark, "New Perspectives on the Origenist Controversy," *American Society of Church History* 59, no. 2 (1990): 162.

heterodoxy, asceticism, and gender. This essay will examine the roots of Rufinus and Jerome's ascetic practices by locating Origen's ideas within early Egyptian monasticism, and will then demonstrate Palestinian monasticism's connections with this tradition. Next, it will detail the regimens practiced within the two Palestinian communities, highlighting the existent differences to demonstrate how the spiritual heads of these communities approached some of Origen's more controversial ideas. Exploring the varying funding, building structure, location, and local ecclesiastic relations along with the rudimentary ascetic rules of these monasteries will help show the different motivations and goals behind these two brands of asceticism. Lastly, this article will expose the ascetic debate subsumed within the later Origenist Controversy. This will serve to emphasize the importance of asceticism in the theological disputations of the early church, which would increasingly affect the greater Roman society.

Origenism in Egyptian Monasticism

“So just recently we hear again about certain ones who appear to hold the highest positions among some of the ascetics in Egypt, Thebaid (Southern Egypt), and other regions elsewhere, and who think like the Hieracites and say there is a resurrection of the flesh, yet not this flesh but one distinct from it.”² In this quote Epiphanius of Salamis correctly gauges the sympathetic position Egyptian monasticism had taken towards the theologian Origen up until the ascent of the archbishop Theophilus in the late fourth century. Even Theophilus was in agreement with the incorporeality of God until his festal letter in 399 C.E., which bowed to pressure of monastic riots.³ While a sympathetic view

² Epiphanius, *Panarion* 82.3. Translated by Jon F. Dechow in *Dogma and Mysticism in Early Christianity: Epiphanius of Cyprus and the Legacy of Origen* (Macon GA: Mercer U.P., 1988), 142.

³ Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton N.J., Princeton U.P., 1992), 45. There is some dispute about whether Theophilus actually

was fairly pervasive, the hotspot of Origenist theology Epiphanius is likely referring to is the monastic community at Nitria, located forty miles south of Alexandria.⁴ Of the community Rufinus of Aquileia reports, “To this place retire those who have first been trained yonder (Nitria) and, with skins shed, now wish to lead a more private life.” In this statement Rufinus emphasizes the shedding of skins, which illustrates Origen’s disputed idea that man was covered with a tunic of skin during the creation of the world, his body.⁵

One prominent monk to whom Epiphanius’ quote refers is Pambo, a celebrated ascetic who met with Rufinus and Melania the Elder during their visit to Egypt.⁶ This visit presents a key connection between the monasticism practiced at the Mt. of Olives community and at Nitria. Given the Origenist beliefs that pervaded this community, it is correct to associate Rufinus and Melania’s theological background and monasticism with Origen. Other monks that can be considered among Epiphanius’ “prominent monks” of Nitria are Evagrius of Ponticus, who gave Melania instructions on running a monastery, Didymus; under whom Rufinus studied for eight years; Macarius the Alexandrian, Serapion; Isidore, and the Tall Brothers. The Tall Brothers were significant in the later Origenist controversy. They were exiled by Theophilus for their pro-Origen theological stance. The connection between Rufinus and Melania and the community of Nitria should not be underestimated. Their visit to this community as well as their continued correspondence with Evagrius presents key ties to Origenism in Egyptian monasticism.

changed his views on this issue, or merely succumbed to outside pressure. Regardless, his stance against Origenism served to bolster the efforts of Jerome, who translated his festal letter, and Epiphanius.

⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁵ Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*. Translated by Gary Barkley (Catholic University of America: C.U.A. Press, 1990), 120.

⁶ W.K. Clarke, *Palladius, The Lausiaca History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), 147. Amoun was the founder of this monastic colony, and by the time Epiphanius was writing *Panarion* 64 against Origenism some three thousand monks lived there.

Between Upper and Lower Egypt there was a significant flow of personages and ideas, however, this did not always lead to uniformity of belief and practice in the various communities. At the end of the fourth century an increasing number of Egyptian ascetics left Egypt and migrated to Palestine due to communal decline as well as the persecution of Theophilus for their beliefs regarding Origen. They took with them their traditions and theological ideas.⁷

The early arguments against Origen can actually be found in Pamphilus' *Apology for Origen*, which was later translated by Rufinus. This apology responds to a growing host of complaints from the Bishop Dionysius and Peter of Alexandria. These men disputed Origen's understanding of the relation between the body and the soul.⁸ Their main issue was Origen's negative view of the body, which implies a fall before the fall to explain the imprisoning of a soul within a body, the creation of man. Other critiques of Origen include his beliefs about eschatology, exegesis, and anthropomorphism. He also held that the devil was capable of salvation, a position that was in discordance with ascetic belief that merited heavenly reward through an individual's actions.⁹ Many of these views were based on his allegorical reading of scripture, of which several of his interpretations were disputed¹⁰. These theological ideas came to fruition in early Egyptian asceticism, where the soul was constantly under attack from external demons and the desires of the body. For Origen, the body was seen as a limit to the soul's ascent, an

⁷ Philip Rousseau, "Monasticism", *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume XIV* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2000), 749.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, & Rufinus: Historical Writings* (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 420.

⁹ Epiphanius, Ep. 51.5, to John of Jerusalem. (394 C.E.)

¹⁰ For the example of "tunics of skin" see B.E. Daley, "The Human Form Divine: Christ's Risen Body and Ours According to Gregory of Nyssa", *Orientalia, Clement, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians Chrysostom Vol. 41* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2003), 309. Other interpretations Jerome finds fault with include an allegorical location of Paradise and salvation of the devil.

“appropriate sparring partner” that one had to overcome in order to enter into spiritual communion with God.¹¹ This idea clashes with Jerome’s view on asceticism, that the body merited the reward of salvation along with the soul. If only the soul received reward in heaven, then Jerome’s emphasis on the practice of virginity and harsh mortifications imposed on the body would be misplaced and unimportant.

Little has been written on the topic of Rufinus and Jerome’s communities in Palestine because there is very little verifiable information about them. The bulk of the material related here comes from Jerome’s extensive correspondence, and these accounts should be approached in their proper context. Many of his letters are written to noblewomen back in Rome with the hope of persuading them to come to the Holy Land. The ascetic practices described may be literal, but it is more likely that they are romanticized with the intention of attracting patronage. Detailed descriptions of his community are strangely absent from his writings, although his monastic career was more engaged with study and writing than with the community around him.¹² Jerome critiques the Mount of Olives monastery for growing slack in ascetic rigor, but this is found in a polemical letter against Rufinus, putting its veracity in doubt. Other sources maintain the ascetic rigor of the Olivet monastery, but highlight different foundational beliefs about perfecting the body and mind, the ultimate goal of asceticism.¹³ The spiritual structure of Melania’s monastery is based upon letters of guidance that were sent to her by Evagrius Ponticus, “sentences for a nun” and “sentences for monks”. Evagrius visited the

¹¹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1988), 165.

¹² Stefan Rebenich, *Jerome* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41.

¹³ A helpful source that describes the monastery on the Mt. of Olive are the letters of Palladius, a visitor of Melania the Elder and Rufinus. His descriptions of the monastery are less prejudiced than Jerome’s accounts, however they were written after the controversy regarding Origen, and he very clearly sides with Rufinus.

community, and given his adherence to Origen it is no stretch to say the foundational rule of the monastery was influenced by Origen's principles. As it will be detailed later, in Evagrius' approach to asceticism, the body is seen as an obstacle rather than a vehicle to the soul's progress. Jerome and Paula can be identified with this ascetic tradition that viewed the body as a vehicle towards salvation.¹⁴

Bethlehem

After meeting with Paula, his wealthy patron, and her daughter Eustochium in Antioch and then visiting Didymus the Blind in Alexandria, Jerome went to Palestine in 386 C.E. His group took up permanent residence in Bethlehem, where Jerome would spend the remainder of his life. Jerome's time in Jerusalem can be broken into two major periods. The first comprises the years from 386 C.E. to 392 C.E., when his activities included building the monastery, instructing the community in scriptures, exchanging frequent notes with Paula, and keeping up extensive correspondence with his contemporaries.¹⁵ The second period, spanning from 392 C.E. to 405 C.E., was occupied by his work translating the Vulgate version of the Hebrew Bible. This work was frequently interrupted by three distractions, ill health, the invasion of the Huns, and the schism caused by friction between the monks of Bethlehem and John of Jerusalem.¹⁶

Jerome and Paula's community at Bethlehem was structurally composed of a monastery for men, and three separate monasteries for the numerous women that had come from the different provinces.¹⁷ It is difficult to establish whether these were all built

¹⁴ The last important source concerning life in the two monasteries are translations Rufinus and Jerome undertook later in their careers. Rufinus translated the rule of St. Basil, whereas Jerome translated the rule of Pammachius. These will both be examined in depth in order to highlight the differences in ascetic regimen and motivation.

¹⁵ Rebenich, *Jerome*, 41.

¹⁶ Jerome, Ep. 77.8, to Oceanus. (399 C.E.)

¹⁷ Jerome, Ep. 108.1, to Eustochium. (404 C.E.)

simultaneously, upon arrival, or whether these buildings were accumulated over time, to match the influx of men and women to the Holy Land. It is noted by Jerome that Paula has exchanged her palace glittering with gold for a mud cabin, and it can be reasonably assumed that the dwelling of the other virgins and monks were far more rustic than their quarters in Rome had been. Jerome mentions a hospice that was built to care for the poor, and he states, “If Joseph and Mary chance to come to Bethlehem, they may not fail to find shelter and welcome.”¹⁸ An important activity of the Palestinian communities was to provide hospitality to visitors of the Holy Land. This included giving alms to the poor and welcoming visitors in their hospice. Indeed, between giving alms to the poor and building the monastery Paula bankrupted herself.¹⁹

The location of the community plays a large role in Jerome’s letters to women living in Rome whom he was attempting to recruit. There is an emphasis placed on proximity to sites from Jesus’ life. From the place of crucifixion, Calvary, to the cave of the nativity that was located on the grounds of his monastery, Jerome uses the sites of the holy land to attract new visitors and recruits. This approach, which emphasizes the geographical images from Christ’s life as an instrument for prayer should be examined alongside the Origen’s tradition of stripping the mind of all material attachments. The focus of Jerome’s spirituality was very much tied to the locality he occupied, Bethlehem, while Origen’s ideas advocate a total separation from the material world. During the late fourth century Palestine was an established center for monasticism, but the earlier centers

¹⁸ Jerome, Ep. 66.14, to Pammachius. (397 C.E.)

¹⁹ Clarke, *Palladius*, 147. Palladius gives an indication of the size of the monastery when he states of Melania and Rufinus, “they reconciled the schism of Paulinus, some 400 monks in all”. This figure should not be taken literally, but implies a very large number of monks within the community.

were in Egypt and Syria.²⁰ All three of these locations interacted with each other by forming their own ascetic traditions and by interpreting those formed in the other regions. St. Chariton and St. Hilarion had set up communities beginning in 320 C.E. in Palestine, but both of these founders were from the East, while Rufinus and Melania were the first pilgrims travelling from the West to establish a monastic community there.²¹ There were several different monastic settlements living concurrently in the land; Anchorites lived in and around Jerusalem and semi-Anchorites inhabited the near Judean desert.²² The Coenobitic tradition was started in Egypt in the fourth century under Pachomius the Great, whereas Syrian monasticism began with Mar Awgin.²³ As previously shown, the Origenist controversy involves communication between these established and newly developed centers of monasticism. While Paula and Jerome both experienced wide arrays of monastic practice before coming to Palestine, notable in the formation of the Bethlehem monastery is a lack of correspondence with anyone from what would be considered strongly influenced by Origen.

The funding for the Bethlehem community was mainly provided by Paula, who by 397 C.E. had exhausted much of her wealth through almsgiving and the building of the monastery. Despite this, she managed to secure an endowment for the future generations of virgins. Jerome reports that he was forced to sell some of his own property

²⁰ Francis X. Murphy, *Rufinus of Aquileia: His Life and Works* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1945), 52.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²² Andrew S. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford California: Stanford U.P., 2004), 159.

²³ William A. Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1910), 37. See also Jerome, *The Life of St. Hilarion*, translated by Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 303. One close tie between Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism was St. Hilarion, who came from Egypt after learning the ascetic tradition from St. Anthony.

in Italy to support the work, lest he “incur the ridicule of carping and envious persons.”²⁴ As he alludes to in this statement, Jerome’s property back in Italy was a point of contention with Rufinus and other rivals because it undermined Jerome’s ascetic credibility as someone who had completely forsaken secular ties. The relationship between Jerome and Paula’s community and the local ecclesiastic authority is one example of the differences between the two. The friendship between Epiphanius of Salamis and Jerome incurred the wrath of the Palestinian bishop, John of Jerusalem; particularly when Epiphanius visited Bethlehem and ordained Paulinianus, Jerome’s brother. This was a grave breach of ecclesiastical authority, and resulted in John of Jerusalem’s refusal to confer baptism on members of Jerome’s community at the Easter Mass.²⁵ For four years this strife continued, which could be correctly called a schism, until it was resolved by the efforts of Melania the Elder and Theophilus.²⁶ These events were triggered by the Origenist controversy, which will be discussed in subsequent pages.

Virgins during this period were subject to exaggerated praise and accolades from coenobitic leaders, showing that the ascetic life for aristocratic women was still largely considered strange and debasing in the upper levels of society.²⁷ Exaggerated praise is clearly evident in Jerome’s letters, which makes it difficult to sort out accurate accounts of female asceticism in Palestine from laudations aimed at changing the social acceptance of the practice. The sources dealing with women’s asceticism in early Christianity present a significant problem because they are rhetorical and given from the perspective of

²⁴ Jerome, Ep. 66.14, to Pammachius. (397 C.E.)

²⁵ Clarke, *Palladius*, 147.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Elizabeth Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 176.

men.²⁸ This leads to a polarizing view of early women ascetics as either “The Devil’s Gateway” or “The Bride of Christ”.²⁹ In the case of Paula, the accounts of her piety are given by Jerome. In defense of his high praise of female virtue Jerome writes, “He will rather condemn himself for pride than us for foolishness if he will ponder how the holy women who were companions of our Lord and Savior ministered to him from their own substance.” He goes on to give examples of notable women from scripture.³⁰ While Jerome was a proponent of female asceticism, it should not be assumed that he had equal views of women’s roles in the ascetic community.

In Origen’s work *Peri Archon* he establishes a fluid conception of the body. Sex and all other attributes that seem inseparable from a person were regarded as merely provisional. There was no limit placed on interaction between sexes, because external forms like gender should not be allowed to hinder the communication between souls.³¹ Jerome’s brand of asceticism and his writings increasingly stress men and women as irreducibly sexual beings, sources of constant temptation to one another. His ideas led to increasing distinction and separation between genders in monasticism. He also emphasized the rewards the body received along with the soul in heaven.³² This alienates him from Origen’s thought, and from the practice of Rufinus. While Paula exercised considerable influence over the virgins in her monastery, her position was secured not through her personality or by election, but was based upon her Aristocratic authority and

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰ Jerome, Ep. 127.5, to Principia. (412 C.E.)

³¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 164.

³² Ibid., 376.

wealth.³³ The nucleus of Melania and Paula's communities were formed by their relatives and servants, indicating traditional patristic rather than charismatic leadership.³⁴

The two main components of asceticism are physical disciplines and mental formation. Thus, the diet, habitation, and schedule of the monastics will be inspected together with their scholarly formation. Since there is little documentation of the common life of the nuns and monks of Jerome's monastery, many inferences need to be drawn from the life of the Patroness, Paula. She was said to refrain from flesh, wine, sauce, fish, honey, milk, eggs, and "all things agreeable to the palate," excepting feast days, in Jerome's letter to Eustochium.³⁵ The common diet of the monastery was probably less rigid than Paula's, who was the head of the female side, but it is not unreasonable to assume that many of these food items were banned or uncommon in the monastery. According to Jerome, Paula also forewent baths and sleeping in a bed. Describing the daily routine of the community, Jerome states:

At dawn, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours, at evening, and at midnight they recited the psalter each in turn. No sister was allowed to be ignorant of the psalms, and all had every day to learn a certain portion of the Holy Scriptures. On the Lord's Day only they proceeded to the church beside which they lived, each company following its own mother-superior. Returning home in the same order, they then devoted themselves to their allotted tasks, and made garments either for themselves or else for others.³⁶

³³ Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, 214.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

³⁵ Jerome, Ep. 108.17, to Eustochium. (404 C.E.)

³⁶ Jerome, Ep. 77.2, to Oceanus. (399 C.E.)

This quote shows the degree to which each day was a highly structured affair. It gives six instances of communal prayer, which was then accompanied by work and personal prayer. The day was entirely filled with work, prayer, and other scholarly pursuits. These descriptions of communal life demonstrate the rigorous structure of the Bethlehem monastery. Chanting of the psalms was a ritualized affair, indicating a scholarly formation that was far more structured than at the Olivet monastery.

The mental formation of the sisters and monks was highly important, as already indicated by the quote, “No sister was allowed to be ignorant of the psalms, and all had every day to learn a certain portion of the Holy Scriptures.”³⁷ Jerome states the zeal Paula had for examining the scriptures, and mentions that she would frequently suggest questions to him.³⁸ Despite Jerome’s disavowal of Cicero and other secular literature, he had a considerable library that included these works while at Bethlehem, and would frequently include large pieces from them in his letters³⁹. There is no mention of the other monastics reading secular literature or commentaries on scripture; it can be surmised from the previous quote that the scholarly focus of the community was on the Old and New Testaments. The top priority for each member of the community was to learn the psalms.⁴⁰ The description of the monastic life at Bethlehem found in Jerome’s letters is by no means comprehensive, but by piecing together these few descriptions we can get a general picture of the structure and life of the community.

Jerome translated *The Pachomian Koinonia* to help guide the Bethlehem monastery. This work was catechetical, and was designed as instruction for early

³⁷ Jerome, Ep. 108.37, to Eustochium. (404 C.E.)

³⁸ Jerome, Ep. 77.7, to Oceanus. (399 C.E.)

³⁹ Jerome, Ep. 108.7, to Eustochium. (404 C.E.)

⁴⁰ Jerome, Ep. 22.35, to Eustochium. (384 C.E.)

Egyptian monks three times a week by the superior of the local monastery.⁴¹ The work is comprised of spiritual exhortations, yet it includes specific practices the monks are cautioned to abstain from. Similar to the rule of St. Basil, these are overeating, oversleeping, and vanity.⁴² It also emphasizes obedience to authority. As Jerome's scholarly career continued, he moved away from the allegorical exegesis that was popular in the Alexandrian communities due to Origen, and focused more on literal interpretation of scripture. His project of translating the Hebrew Old Testament can be seen as an attempt to return to the "correct" reading of scripture. Although this activity is now lauded as invaluable to the early church, it was opposed by many of Jerome's contemporaries, including Augustine.⁴³

This literal exegesis can be correctly associated with the "Asiatic tradition", which emphasizes a unitary conception of reality and is strongly influenced by Judaism and Stoicism. Philosophically this tradition stems from Aristotle, who saw the body and the mind as incomplete parts of a whole, which must be examined comprehensively. Jerome's identification with this tradition increases as his career progresses. This philosophical pedigree contrasts with the "Alexandrian tradition" with which Origen's ideas are commonly associated. This broad ideology bases itself on Platonic conceptions of the world as a two level reality. It emphasizes a separation between intelligible and corporeal realities, often portraying a direct conflict between the two.⁴⁴ These two conceptions of reality make themselves apparent in the ascetic motivations and goals

⁴¹ Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia: Volume Three* (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1982), 1.

⁴² Ibid., 14.

⁴³ Augustine, Ep. 28.2, to Jerome. (394 C.E.)

⁴⁴ Emanuela Prinzivalli, "The Controversy About Origen Before Epiphanius," in *Origeniana Septima* ed. W.A. Bienert and U. Kuhneweg (Leuven: Leuven U.P., 1999), 198.

behind Rufinus and Jerome's monastic communities. Origen approached theological problems through a philosophical position; while Jerome's primary training was as a rhetorician. While both of these thinkers are conversant with the other's tradition, each primarily employs a different approach.⁴⁵ Jerome's shifting stance on Origen throughout his career can be attributed to the development of his scholastic pursuit; in particular his translation of the Vulgate. Indeed, Jerome's disavowal of Origen should be approached much like his disavowal of Cicero; it was not based on an effort to discredit Origen's texts, but was rather an attempt to distinguish his scholarly career from Origen's.

Mount of Olives

Melania the Elder arrived in Jerusalem and set up a monastery on the Mount of Olives in 375 C.E.⁴⁶ During his period in Jerusalem Rufinus was ordained as a presbyter, and staunchly supported the bishop John of Jerusalem, who was charged as being a supporter of Origen by Epiphanius of Salamis. Jerome accused Rufinus of being the principle instigator of the minor schism between the Bethlehem community and the local episcopate, but this accusation is unlikely given Melania's role in bringing about the reconciliation of the two parties.⁴⁷ In 397 C.E. Melania and Rufinus left for Italy, where Rufinus would spend the remainder of his life and would translate Origen's *First Principles*.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ P. O'Cleirigh, "Origen's Consistency: An Issue in the Quarrel Between Rufinus and Jerome," in *Origeniana Septima* ed. W.A. Bienert and U. Kuhneweg (Leuven: Leuven U.P., 1999), 231. Jerome's rhetorical approach focuses on how the argument is made and the effectiveness of the argument. Origen's philosophical approach does not neglect these aspects, but its focus lies in the speculation behind his arguments.

⁴⁶ Murphy, *Rufinus*, 39. There is argument over which year Rufinus joined her due to a discrepancy in Palladius' history, but it is most likely in 380 C.E.

⁴⁷ Clarke, *Palladius*, 147.

⁴⁸ Murphy, *Rufinus*, 82.

The structures of the Bethlehem community were modeled on the already established Olivet community of Rufinus and Melania.⁴⁹ This means they must also have had separate monasteries for virgins and monks, accompanied by a hospice for the poor. Palladius states, “She (Melania) founded a monastery in Jerusalem, and spent twenty-seven years there in charge of a convent of fifty virgins.”⁵⁰ The community was located on the Mt. of Olives, to the East of Jerusalem and overlooking the city, and was situated with other burgeoning Christian communities. The good relationship between Rufinus and John of Jerusalem may have been in part because of their close proximity to one another. Melania possessed one of the largest Roman fortunes of the time, making the Olivet community very well funded. Rufinus and Melania were keen to give hospitality to visitors, and frequently received bishops, monks, and wealthy patrons from the west.⁵¹ These included Silvia, Flavius Rufinus, Bacurius, and Evagrius Ponticus. These personalities were involved in the later Origenist controversy.⁵² Between the communities of Rufinus and Jerome there was a certain undercurrent of tension, caused by different conceptions of possessions and mortification of the flesh.⁵³

Rufinus’ translation of the rule of St Basil while he was in Rome gives credence to the assumption that it provided guidance for the Olivet monastery. The work was in his possession in Greek while he lived in Palestine.⁵⁴ The emphasis of *The Asketikon* as a whole is strict obedience to the superior of the monastery. It is not organized as a formal rule; instead it is based on several questions about monasticism posed by the members of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁰ Clarke, *Palladius*, 147. This illustrates a smaller number than the Bethlehem community when contrasted with its “four hundred” monks, but it should definitely still be regarded as a large community.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 23.

⁵³ Murphy, *Rufinus*, 61.

⁵⁴ Anna M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2005), 128.

the community. These questions were occupied with the issue of perseverance in and strengthening of faith, but occasionally they touch on more practical matters, like who distributed the food within the community.⁵⁵ In this sense it is similar to the work of Pachomius, which is a series of statements that do not reflect a comprehensive picture of the coenobitic life. Basil did not lay down very many specific guidelines, but instead left these matters, including sleep and food, up to the leader of the monastery's discretion. Some clues are given as to the various authoritative positions held within the monastery.⁵⁶

When compared with *The Pachomian Koinonia* Jerome translated, there are no large differences in the texts, however the influences behind them and the traditions both are grounded in are important. Pachomius' tradition was founded on an individual striving for God that engaged in harsh fasts and abstinences. Monastic life lived as a community was seen only as a necessary development stemming from the need to practice works of charity for others⁵⁷. In this sense, Pachomius emphasizes striving for God as a community, yet there was a necessary balance between the individual and the community. While Basil's work also focused on community, this concept developed for him out of large numbers of people joining his solitude, his individual pursuit of God. This aligns well with Origen's perspective on attaining salvation, which he saw as a highly individual affair.

Throughout Basil's letters on monasticism an important theme arises: an emphasis on moderation and prohibition of strict fasting. This puts him in direct confrontation with

⁵⁵ Ibid., 148.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 352, 354. Basil mentions a steward who is responsible for dispensing alms and the storeroom. There is also a head appointed over the kitchen; meals were eaten communally.

⁵⁷ Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 288.

Jerome, who was accused before leaving Rome of suggesting such extreme fasting that it led to a women's death⁵⁸. The root of this issue should be seen in different theological views of the body. In Origenist thought the body did not share in the glorification of the mind in heaven, whereas for Jerome the body would share in the reward based upon the abstinences it had endured. Basil has ties with the theological work of Origen. While in his seclusion at Annesi with Gregory of Nazianzus he mentions reading Origen's work, the *Philocalia*.⁵⁹ His attraction to Origen is understandable given the influence of Stoic and Platonic anthropological teachings in his conversion.⁶⁰ This aligns him firmly with the Alexandrian philosophical tradition that has been mentioned earlier. While the *Asketikon* and the *Pachomian Koinonia* chronicle the early development of monasticism, it is a stretch to treat these works as comprehensive rules; instead they should be looked at as monastic exhortations. Since their primary focus is spiritual exhortation, they are useful in examining the theological belief of their authors.

It is reported Melania once said, "Be sure of this, be sure of it, that I am in the sixtieth year of my life and except for the tips of my fingers neither my feet nor my face nor any one of my limbs have touched water, although I am a victim to various ailments and the doctors try to force me. I have not consented to make the customary concessions to the flesh, never in my travels have I rested on a bed or used a litter."⁶¹ Besides the rules given to her by Evagrius Ponticus and the translation of St. Basil's *Asketikon* done by Rufinus, this description given by Palladius is the only other clue of Melania's personal asceticism. This description is strikingly similar to that of Paula, who also refrained from

⁵⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 66.

⁶¹ Clarke, *Palladius*, 160.

using a bed and bathing, yet there are not any strict dietary rules given in this account. In his *Sentences for Virgins* Evagrius warns against overconsumption of food, the temptations that come about through sleep, and adornment of clothing.⁶² According to these sentences, servitude should be disallowed in monastic settings. While the spiritual structure of Melania's monastery was based on these sentences, it is unclear whether this hierarchical structure was followed.⁶³ While the physical privations practiced by Paula and Melania are important, abstaining from beds and baths, certain foods, and having servants, of greater importance is the reason given for undertaking these harsh mortifications. Peter Brown affirms that while similar privations occur in early Christian monasticism, there is a variety of beliefs about why they are undertaken and what transformations they will bring about.⁶⁴ It is demonstrable that the reasons behind these two women's actions were fundamentally different.

The difference lies primarily in the advisors for these two women, Jerome for Paula, Evagrius and Rufinus for Melania. Evagrius advised Melania to limit food and water, and also recommended toil, solitude, and vigils to help overcome the passions of the body.⁶⁵ He saw asceticism as an attempt to break the power of images over the body, and admonishes her to strive for "pure prayer", which was free from images of this world. Evagrius carried this belief into his view on the Eucharist, which he spiritualized. The flesh of Christ was seen as the practical virtues and the blood of Christ as wisdom.⁶⁶ While the privations described here are similar to Paula's, the focus of Melania's

⁶² Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2003), 123, 125, 127.

⁶³ Sinkewicz, *Evagrius*, 132.

⁶⁴ Peter Brown, "Asceticism: Pagan and Christian," *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume XIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), 605.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth A. Clark, "New Perspectives on the Origenist Controversy," *American Society of Church History* 59, no. 2 (1990): 153.

⁶⁶ Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 130.

practices are to create a separation between the intellect and the body. This falls right in line with Jerome's later critique of Origen, who saw the body as "a tunic of skin", something unnatural that would be shed completely once resurrection did away with sin. A relationship with God that is free of any bodily imagery implies a relationship with the world that is also freed from the body. Opposing this idea, Paula's asceticism is concerned primarily with the avoidance of sin, using the body as a means toward salvation. Melania's goal can be seen as mystical "pure prayer" that came from total renunciation of the body, while Paula's aim was the perfection of the body through a disciplined ascetic regimen.

Palladius reports of Melania, "Being very learned and loving literature she turned night into day by perusing every writing of the ancient commentators, including 3,000,000 (lines) of Origen and 2,500,000 (lines) of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius, Basil, and other standard writers. Nor did she read them once only and casually, but she laboriously went through each book seven or eight times."⁶⁷ Emphasis should be placed on the three million lines of Origen Melania had read repeatedly; these give credence to Jerome's accusations of Origenism aimed at the Olivet community. It can be assumed that the other aristocratic women in the community would be able to read Greek, making it likely that the other virgins may have followed in this scholarly pursuit.⁶⁸ This quote also shows that Melania was engaged in different scholarly endeavors than Paula, who stuck primarily to reading scripture and the psalms. Melania's literary repertoire suggests an active participation in speculative theological questions, whereas Paula confined herself mainly to the study of the Old and New Testaments. The Bethlehem community's

⁶⁷ Clarke, *Palladius*, 160.

⁶⁸ Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, 168.

spiritual life was centered on reciting the Psalms. While these recitations were a more ritualized activity, they were adaptable to both allegorical interpretations and literal exegesis.⁶⁹ The lack of speculative philosophy in Paula's reading separates her from Melania, and suggests she even approached the recitation of the Psalms in a different manner.

Origen himself wrote in a time of greater theological speculation and pluralism which had diminished by the fourth century. In Epiphanius' *Panarion* 64, written against the theological ideas of Origen, he criticizes speculation on the eternal verities of the faith and a rationalistic approach to the divine.⁷⁰ Rufinus showed an appreciation for this type of scholarly speculation in his writings; one notable example is the preface to his translation of Origen's *First Principles*. He states the topics are, "exceedingly obscure and difficult; for in them he (Origen) discusses matters over which the philosophers have spent their whole lives without any result."⁷¹ There was a growing movement in this period towards defining orthodoxy, and Jerome is one of the early heresiologists engaged in this activity.⁷² This puts him in stark opposition to the practices of Melania and Rufinus, who pursued speculative theology. Paula's scholarly pursuits are notable because there is no mention of her reading any extra biblical works or engaging in complicated theological discourse. Jerome most frequently commends her for simplicity and humility. When approached by a nameless heretic, she summoned Jerome to rebuke

⁶⁹ J.H. Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary* (London: Cromwell Press, 2003), 49.

⁷⁰ Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism*, 140.

⁷¹ Schaff, *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, & Rufinus*, 428. Within its proper context this quote should be interpreted as laudatory of Origen and not a discouragement to the study of his texts.

⁷² R. D. Williams, "Origen: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy," in *Origeniana Septima* ed. W.A. Bienert and U. Kuhneweg (Leuven: Leuven U.P., 1999), 3.

him.⁷³ Therefore, while the physical privations of Paula and Melania are similar, their contemplative life evidences their different theological beliefs.

The Origenist Controversy and Asceticism

The main actions which comprise the Origenist controversy as it is known today began in the mid 390's in Palestine when Epiphanius charged John of Jerusalem with Origenism. Rufinus aligned himself with John; and Jerome supported the claims of Epiphanius of Salamis.⁷⁴ This was not principally a matter of theology, rather, it mainly concerned the episcopal jurisdiction of John, who had opposed the ordination of Paulinus by Epiphanius.⁷⁵ The dispute was smoothed over when Rufinus and Jerome, "joined hands in peace at the Church of the Resurrection."⁷⁶ Little mention is made about why and how this reconciliation came about, but it was important in preventing a major schism within the Palestinian church. The first sparks of the controversy were important in solidifying the main agents and their relationships that were involved in the later years.

Rufinus departed for Italy in 397 C.E., where he began translating Origen's work *On First Principles* for the nobleman Macarius who was battling the astrological determinism of the mathematici.⁷⁷ This work is based on answering the Platonic question, "in what way has there come to be so great and various diversity among created things?" Given its foundation in philosophical conceptions and allegorical exegesis, it is understandable why Jerome attempted to distance himself from the translation.⁷⁸ Instead of safeguarding his own orthodoxy, Rufinus' choice to associate Jerome with Origen in

⁷³ Jerome, Ep. 108.23, to Eustochium. (404 C.E.)

⁷⁴ Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 13.

⁷⁵ Epiphanius, Ep. 51.1, to John of Jerusalem.

⁷⁶ Apologia III, 33.

⁷⁷ Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 13.

⁷⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 163.

the preface of *First Principles* reignited the controversy.⁷⁹ Once Jerome was informed about Rufinus' writings, he was apt to disassociate himself as much as possible from Origen's views; even more so because of his extensive background reading and translating Origen's work. Jerome's background in Origenism was capable of compromising the support of Epiphanius, Theophilus, and Anastasius, the Bishop of Rome.⁸⁰ Jerome's adamant disavowals of Origenism were an attempt to downplay the similarity between their thought. This coalition was newly formed and is the first instance of a concerted effort to eradicate disputed points of Origenism from "orthodox" dialogue. All three of these men had their own motivation for declaiming Origen.

Theophilus was mainly concerned with pacifying the anthropomorphite monks in Egypt who demanded Origen's works be condemned.⁸¹ Epiphanius states that his principle concern in composing *The Panarion* was to dispute Arianism, which he held Origen created.⁸² Jerome's motivations are complex. He was interested in affirming his own orthodoxy and distinguishing himself from heterodox company. The theological arguments he gives against Origen evidence fundamental disagreements on issues of belief. Therefore, for Jerome at least, these issues cannot be simplified as solely based on social interactions and relationships as Elizabeth Clark's work tends to emphasize. Jerome immediately began composing books against Rufinus, where he states the issues of contention clearly and goes on the offensive against Rufinus, claiming he proscribed to Origen's controversial view disavowing the resurrection of the body.⁸³ Through his

⁷⁹ Schaff, *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, & Rufinus*, 427.

⁸⁰ Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 38.

⁸¹ Ibid., 44. Anthropomorphism is the belief that man is made in the actual image of God, and therefore God the Father can be properly "imaged" in human form.

⁸² Dechow, *Dogma and Mysticism*, 245.

⁸³ Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 14.

friendship with the wealthy widow Marcella in Rome and his disciple Pammachius, Jerome was able to disseminate literature attacking Rufinus.⁸⁴ Only through time and the intervention of mutual friends like the Bishop Chromatius of Aquileia and Paulinus of Nola did the controversy abate.⁸⁵ The scope of the controversy needs to be extended earlier to include the years preceding key events, for these events were largely determined by the prior ascetic debate.

Conclusion

Looking at the personal practices of Melania the elder and Paula along with the ascetic advice they received from their mentors shows the fundamental differences in their beliefs about the body and its scholarly formation. The motivation of asceticism based on Origen's thought was to perfect the soul, which was able to exist apart from the body. For Jerome, the body and soul were to be approached comprehensively. The key question both thinkers were asking is whether the body persisted into the heavenly realm, and if so, did it maintain its merit and gender? By separating the divine from the body, Origen gave rise to an asceticism that was in direct conflict with the Asiatic tradition, which held greater influence over Jerome. This conflict was first played out within Jerome, then between the two communities in Palestine, and was later shown in the writings of Rufinus and Jerome. Going back to the history of Egyptian monasticism provides examples of debate surrounding Origen's theological ideas, and these can then be connected with the two Palestinian communities. Rufinus and Jerome's monastic communities in Palestine had tense relations even before the Origenist Controversy due to these ascetic roots. These tensions were only aggravated by

⁸⁴ Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 29.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 14.

the public spotlight of the controversy. The ascetic debate helped lead to the Origenist controversy, but it was also subsumed underneath it.